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SELF-OBJECTIFICATIONS

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Submitted: May 2, 1973

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Marpha, whose many sacrifices and quiet supportiveness have provided the financial and emotional freedom without which this set of photographs would not have been possible.

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Illustrations

All illustrative material is contained in the Appendix. The slides are assigned numbers in normal reading order, from top to bottom and from left to right. Textual references to any particular slide will be accompanied by this plate number.

Introduction: Statement of Thesis Proposal

- I. Purpose of the thesis: This thesis is the subjective intrusion of the photographer into the objective reality captured by the straight photographic image through the inclusion of part of the photographer in the picture area.
- II. Scope of the thesis: The final thesis will be a group of photographs whose number is sufficient to represent the nature of the work. A discussion of the nature of the images will accompany this visual material.

Since I am attempting to physically enter into a photographic record, documentary images will be examined and related to the development of the concept Equivalence.

Other areas of possible inquiry are the Aristophanic concept of sidestepping reality by being creatively bizarre, the attempt of nineteenth century Romantic poets to make nature a mirror of their subjective sensibilities, Andy Warhol's Pop Art treatment of common objects, and the body works created by some Conceptual Art sculptors. Also the low key reality of Edward Ruscha's photographic books and the high key reality of Surrealist Art are valid areas of research, as both suggest possible ways of handling the subject material.

More obvious photographic parallels which will be subjected to close examination are Lee Friedlander's Self Portrait and Bill Brandt's Perspective of Nudes. Also because these images will be a conscious fabrication and because they will require a placing of part of myself within a context, Les Krim's conceptual art approach to photography might be very fruitfully re-evaluated in terms of the self-revealing self-portrait.

- III. Procedure: Although the photographer wants the visual material in the thesis to have the validity of an image produced by the conventional methods of straight photography, he reserves the right to use any method which he feels appropriate for the production of the photograph. For example, he may find it necessary to place himself into an image through montage. The images will be presented mounted with accompanying verbal material.

Exposition

Technical Information:

All photographs were made with a 28 mm lens which was the best compromise between the physical requirements of the angle of coverage, the depth of field, and the photographer's desire to keep distortion sufficiently low so that it did not become the dominant visual element of the image.

The film, Tri-X, was generally overexposed and underdeveloped in D-23 in an attempt to have a soft tone structure which the photographer feels is more suggestive of the real physical world than a higher contrast, more blackly dramatic selenium toned photograph.

The prints were all made on Agfa Portriga Rapid III. The glossy surface paper was chosen instead of the semi-matte II8 despite the latter's greater softness because it preserved the tactile high information quality of the images. III was sufficiently soft to maintain the soft shadow and highlight values which I desired. The warm tone of the paper also helped bias the basic reaction of the viewer to the image. The warmth of the image predisposes the viewer to actively want a relationship with the physical world pictured.

In short, the methods of conventional silver photography were adhered to in an attempt to package reality in as believable form as possible. I doubt that anyone would argue that a great deal of credence is generally given to the concept that the standard photographic print is guilelessly truthful.

If I am to make a subjective statement of my relations with the physical universe: then, the apparent validity of that statement depends on how truthfully its foundation, physical facts, are presented.

Mental Elements:

The images are not and could not be the exposition of one simple idea; that, perhaps, is the basic nature of the human mind. They are also most likely the products of many ingredients totally unknown to the artist. These factors will lie dormant until a viewer with the necessary sensibilities reacts with them. However, it is desirable for me to list and discuss the elements which the photographer was conscious of during the making of these images.

Traditionally I have been a documentary photographer. I was and am strongly influenced by people who have gone out and recorded what they found.

Beginning with Henry Mayhew's verbal and visual catalogues of English working class types in London Labour and London Poor and continuing through the work of John Thompson, Street Life in London. Jacob Riis in How the Other Half Lives, Lewis Hine, The Farm Security Administration, Doris Ulmann, Bourke-White in You Have Seen Their Faces, Weegee in Naked City, and some of the W. Eugene Smith Life stories, there has been a long and powerfully honest use of the medium in an objective manner. Thus there is ingrained in me a love for the photograph as record.

I enjoy the work of Ruscha in books like Real Estate Opportunities and the Becher's in Anonyme Skulpturen, which are celebrations of the act of recording. The former is photographs of vacant lots and the latter is of several classes of industrial structure. They convey a sense of the photograph as possessor of the myriad physicality of the world.

With the work of Cartier-Bresson, I became aware of the possibility of the photographer's intrusion into the photographic record in the form of style. I now have to reject Bresson's solution to this subjective-objective dichotomy as being too simple; it was after all only a technical solution on the visual level. The photographer gave little of himself to the image other than a strong sense of formal composition, which is arbitrarily imposed on the subject from without. Yet he opened my eyes to the possibility that the photographer could find in the physical world sympathetic vibrations which harmonized with his internal feelings. "...inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it."¹

This train of thought leads to Alfred Steiglitz's theory of Equivalence. "My cloud photographs, my Sons of the Sky, are equivalents of my life experience. All of my photographs are equivalents of my basic philosophy of life. All art is but a picture of certain basic relationships; an equivalent of the Artist's most profound experience of life."² This raises the possibility of spiritual or metaphysical events functioning simultaneously with the physical world in the

photograph. The physical world could be a vehicle for the most profound subjective feelings. The photograph becomes the link between reality and man's seeking for a spiritual sense of oneness with or a cosmic order in the world.

However, I am somewhat doubtful of any claims of man's successful union with nature. The world has known a long sequence of such myths. The religious sense of order that built Chartres and permitted dirty stories in Chaucer's highly religious work, the Canterbury Tales, died when the literalness of God's will as read in the Bible and seen in physical events fell into doubt. If allegory will no longer work as a suitable philosophical vehicle in literature, how can we expect a visual narrative to carry the same information.

Perhaps most crucial to this discussion is the fate of the Romantic poets. We are at present still trying the same solutions that failed to work for them. This is best evidenced by the current popularity of the slang expression, "Do your own thing," as opposed to the classical approach, "Do someone else's thing, only better."

The Romantic poets evolved at a time when the decline of the traditional Jewish God as seen in historical events was eclipsed by the rise of the cult of the individual. Freed to think for himself by science and without external authority and tradition, the poet tried to envision a world whose order was in harmony with the feelings he had with the world. Wordsworth tried to make the world a sympathetic place by returning to his childhood memories of its pleasantness. Coleridge found it deliciously mysterious. Keats ordered it with a sense for lush tactile

sensuality. Each sought a relation with the world based on their own sensibilities. This approach was doomed to failure because as soon as the world proved itself to be basically nonanthropomorphic the longed for sense of order disappeared. With death and suffering comes the realization of the pathetic fallacy of believing that the physical universe conforms to any human values. Captain Ahab was possessed by the desire to kill Moby Dick, not for revenge, but to find out if a God was hiding behind such terribleness.

Only one Romantic, Blake, managed to maintain his vision. He attained a mystic vision which encompassed all evil and good in one order. This solution is not readily available to all of us.

What the Romantics did succeed in doing was to bring a subjective sense of truth to the world for at least the length of the poem. Maybe we should be content to see a sense of order in the world for as long as we are looking at a photograph.

Another topic which seemed to have something to do with the thinking processes associated with the image making was minimal art. Pop Art and its offspring, New Realist painting, seem to glorify the simple straight forward record. Soup cans, horse show winners, and lifelike plastic human sculpture arranged in a football scene are a making precious of what photography is about. To make photographic records while stressing that that is what you are doing seems a conscious participation in the creation of art out of life.³

Conceptual art, as it emphasizes the mental act of creating or the activity of creating over the final product, stresses the presence of the

artist over that of the art. The artist who uses his own body for sculpture or is satisfied to describe a performance without needing to perform it or does earth works as transient as the weather is more concerned with the nature of the artist than the art.⁴

With reality sanctified by Pop and Post Pop and with the artist now a fit topic for art, I am free to blatantly explore my relation to the most trivial physical events.

There are photographic antecedents for this body of work. Bill Brandt in his Perspective of Nudes photographed the human body as it related to natural environments. He consciously played upon the visual echoing of body parts in geological formations. This is a design solution which seemed too pat an answer to the problem.

Mike Mandel in Myself raises the question of his own nature by trying himself out in various situations. Seeing himself in different places with different results, he simultaneously affirms his own identity while freely confessing that he doesn't have the slightest idea who he really is.

Finally, Self Portrait by Lee Friedlander is the most obvious parallel with this set of photographs. Friedlander seems, however, to be predominantly interested with the nature of the medium - the montage of reflections, the reduction of three dimensions to two, and the random way the picture surface is broken up by chance arrangements of objects. A sense of humor is often the dominant element in the images. Also he is often the main and literal subject of the photograph.

I on the other hand began photographing with a greater interest in the objects external to myself and the naturalness of seeing one's feet when looking down.

Rationale:

This series was initiated as a problem solving approach on a rudimentary level in hopes that solutions to more complex problems might simultaneously arise. If photography is most true to its own nature when it is making objective records of external events, and if the nature of the artist in a Romantic age is to point to his own unique individuality, perhaps the artist cannot fully achieve his subjective goals through the use of strictly photographic materials. The last great push to show that photography was an art, Pictorialism, used techniques which greatly compromised the objectivity of the photographic record in order to obtain results more painterly in feeling.

It was desired that, if possible, I should find my own solution to this paradox. Such a solution might in fact be crucial to the direction of all future artistic pursuits.

Being naturally slow to change old patterns of thought, a little forced growing was suggested. In order that I should have to deal with the above problem to the exclusion of all others, it was reduced to its lowest common denominator on a physical level. It was posed that I should physically intrude into the picture area thus satisfying both the requirements of objective recording and subjective involvement.

When the photographer raises his rectangular viewfinder, he is imposing an order on the external world. Unconsciously through accommodating the subject to the rectangle, he is making the world conform to the values of good design: balance, harmony, dominance, and unity. Since I, like all other photographers, am seeking to impose order, why not deal with it openly. Confronted with the task of reconciling the image with my presence in it, I would do nothing other than explore my mental and emotional relation with the physical universe.

Reading the final set of images:

It is difficult to deal directly with the images since I am not as yet sufficiently removed from their making and all the ego traps which that entails. I can, however, talk about the final presentation of the images and thereby get to my present reactions about them.

Photographs 1 and 2 are little more than compositional solutions to the problem saved from rejection by a strong sense of involvement with the presence of reality. Plates 3 and 4 are also technical solutions being the introduction of harmony through the control of tone. These four images are solutions which I had a great deal of trouble arriving at, and yet I knew that they would be inadequate long before I made them work.

Plate 5 questions my relation to the beauty which I find in nature. Plate 6 turns camera on my own human frailties and questions the vanity of my aspiring to make art.

Plates 7 through 11 deal with the nature of my relations with my fellow humans. Plate 7 is definitely a photographer's self-doubts. The

rest are commentaries on my doubts concerning human relations. Plates 9 and 10 use people as compositional elements.

Plates 12 and 13 are direct confrontations with nature. The belligerent quality of the meeting is very noticeable. It is almost as if independence from nature has to be affirmed before any affection and interaction with it can take place.

Plates 14 to 17 are that growing interaction with the physical world. Some of the distance and mistrust has remained. It is this playful reality-questioning quality which seems to say, "All right I will play the truth seeking game because I am human and must, but I am not going to take my eyes off you for one second". These images ring very true for me. There is an order in the world, but it is one definitely brought by man to nature. It does not naturally occur there.

That I could take and like plates 18 to 20 is the most amazing revelation of the whole project for me. They are an open and free association with nature. Before this series of photographs I had flatly refused to photograph nature believing that to do so would be too blatantly and nauseatingly Romantic. Combining nudes and trees or any other attempt to anthropomorphize nature always seemed an overly obvious groveling after security in the non-caring physical world. Image 20 is one of self-acceptance and consolation with myself. It implies that now that my relation with reality has been tentatively settled and a set of operating values is suggested, I can be at peace to go on with life. Working that openly with nature was very satisfying. I am looking forward to doing so again.

Conclusion:

Did I succeed in defining my subjective relations with the objective world? In the sequence I believe that I stated a possible solution and one that was characteristic of my nature. Perhaps of more importance, at the end of the series I rose above mentally formulating interactions with reality and found sympathies with it and with myself. Such emotional communion with the world of death is still fraudulent but possible, enjoyable and even necessary.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cartier-Bresson, Introduction to The Decisive Moment.
2. Norman, Alfred Stieglitz, p. 37.
3. The Photo-Realists: 12 Interviews, Art in America,
Nov. 1972, pp. 73-89.

Masheck, Verist Sculpture: Hanson and De Andrea,
Art in America, Nov. 1972, pp. 90-99.
4. Any or all issues of Avalanche through number five.

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22. Weegee, Naked City, Essential Books, N. Y., 1945.

Appendix



MAR73R3

1



MAR73R3

2



MAR73R3

3

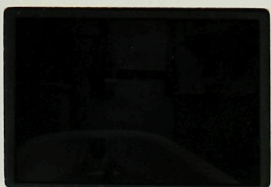


4



MAR73R3

5



MAR73R3

6



MAR73R3

7



8



9



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MAR

10



MAR73R3

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12



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20